

“As We Believe, So We Sing:
V - ‘I Believe In The Holy Catholic Church . . .’”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
August 8, 2010

Acts 10:34-48

John 17:1-11

When I began last week’s sermon in this series on the Apostles’ Creed, I told you that that week’s phrase, “I believe in the Holy Spirit” was perhaps the most difficult one for us to define. Well, I’ve got news for you today. This week’s phrase, “I believe in the holy catholic church, is, by far, the most misunderstood phrase of the entire creed. I can’t tell you the number of times people have questioned me about it.

I talked to a clergy friend of mine, and he said the same thing. One Sunday after worship, a first time visitor to the service in his church, came up to him, madder than a wet hen, and confronted him. “What in the world are you guys doing in this church, saying we believe in the catholic church? What a crock!” And before my friend could explain the phrase, the man took off, never to be seen in that church again!

What my pastor friend would have said to him, had he had the chance, was, “we’re not saying we believe in the Roman Catholic church. We say we believe in the catholic, small c, church - in other words, the universal church. The word catholic with a small c, means universal. We believe in the catholic church, the universal church throughout the world - all who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, no matter their denominational affiliation.

When my friend told me that story this week, he said that I should tell you about it in my sermon, but then he added, tell them this too. A couple of months after that upsetting experience with the man who left and never came back, another first-time visitor to the church, also came up to him after the service to talk about that phrase in the Apostles’ Creed. She had been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church, and left after a time, but still most of her family were Catholics, and she had a warm place in her heart for the church of her youth.

When she came up to my friend to talk about saying, “I believe in the holy catholic church” during the creed, she had tears in her eyes. Instead of confronting him in anger, she thanked him. She was so grateful for the fact that, by saying that, that church affirmed the church of her youth. And you know what? She came back the next week, and the next week, and has been worshipping at my friend’s church ever since.

When we say that we believe in the holy catholic church, we say that we believe that God's church on earth is bigger than just us. And that God is at work in those churches just as surely as God is at work in our's. And that there are faithful Christians in all of those churches, just as surely as there are faithful Christians in our's.

That's what we mean by that whole phrase, "the holy catholic church." But lest we concentrate too much on the "catholic" part of that phrase, I want us to first, look at the bigger picture, and that is, that we believe in the church - period.

We believe in the church, in the institution of the church. If we didn't, you and I wouldn't be here. We believe in it, we are a part of it, it matters to us, and we believe, it matters to the world.

It is the place where we come together to offer worship and praise to the God who has so richly blessed us, who walks with us every moment of our lives, who carries us through the bad times, and rejoices with us in the good. The church is the place where we sit together, and sing together, and pray together, and listen together. The church is the place where we intentionally listen to God's holy word, and intentionally spend time thinking about what it means for our lives. It is the place where we pray, silently and aloud; it is the place where we are still and quiet, and take the time to seriously think about the state of our souls, confessing when we need to do so. It is the place where we see our old friends, and make new ones.

And the church is the place where we come to intentionally grow in faith. We come here because we know to be a person of faith means to never stop trying to grow closer to the Lord, to know that there is always something new to learn. So we come here for Sunday School, and Bible studies, and Beginnings classes, and Disciple classes, and Vacation Bible School, and men's studies, and United Methodist Women's circles, and in so many other ways. The church is the place we come to in order to intentionally grow in faith.

And the church is a place where we find opportunities to share our faith through service. I just finished working on some things for our upcoming stewardship fair and I was astonished by the number of opportunities for service we have here in this church and out in the world. The church is a catalyst for that service, because we know that Jesus, as he washed the feet of his disciples, told us to go forth and serve in remembrance of him.

So we come here to find ways to serve - some of them in the church by teaching, or leading, or counting, or singing, or ushering, or greeting, or in a hundred other ways; and still others outside of the church - Christmas in April, the water giveaway on the 4th of July, mentoring at Thomson Estates, going on mission

trips, serving at the rotating homeless shelter or the Mary Randall Center, or in a hundred other ways.

And the church is the place from which we go to witness to the world about the love of God poured out in Christ Jesus - whether in word or in deed.

And finally, and in a way I know means so much to so many of you, the church is a place where we love and support one another. All you have to do to find evidence of that is walk into this room on any given Sunday morning and hear the buzz in the room before worship. People are glad to see each other, to learn how others are doing, to see what they can do to help, to make plans with each other.

We are a family, we are a source of love and support for each other, and we help each other through all the up's and down's of life.

One of the saddest things I see in ministry, is when I do what are called "courtesy" funerals - those are funerals for families who don't go to church, or don't have a pastor. Many, many times I have witnessed those people suffer so badly, more deeply than they needed to, because they didn't have a church family to support them, and love them, and be there with them. They're on their own, and you hear it in their anguished cries and see it in their lonely faces. It tears me apart when I see it, and I give God thanks for this community of faith, this church, filled with people who love and support each other.

We believe in the church - first and foremost - the church that Jesus called into being, and called Peter to lead.

Now, before I move on to the "catholic" part of that phrase, I want to say something else. Recently, I have seen more than once something on Facebook that really irritated me - it's a statement that goes like this: "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian, any more than standing in a garage makes you a car."

Now, I get what they are trying to say - that not all people who go to church act like Christians, that just because you go to church, you're not automatically a Christian. But I want to tell you something, you're far more likely to be a Christian, and a faithful Christian, if you do go to church. Sure, you can be a Christian if you don't, but you're far more faithful, if you do.

Okay, I'll get off the soapbox, and move on.

When we say we believe in the holy catholic church, we say that God's church with all of the wonderful things I mentioned earlier, is seen in a whole lot of different ways throughout the world. To list all of the different denominations, would take me a month of Sundays. But no matter how many different denominations there are, there is one thing we all have in common - and that is our

belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world.

So while we have different views on what makes for a sacrament, and have different ways of worshiping, different church structures, different views on authority, and baptism and communion; while some may speak in tongues, and others chant; and some dance in the aisles or wave their hands, and others worship in the beauty of silence - we are all still one in Christ Jesus.

When we say this in our creed, we say that we affirm and love and support all others who believe in Christ, no matter how different they are from us. We are all part of one family in Christ.

One preacher actually talked to his congregation about the catholic church, the universal church, being like a family. Listen to what he said:

He said, "I often talk to students who tell me how wonderful their families are, and I am glad you feel that way. But just wait till your family expands. Just wait until you have in-laws and ex-laws, cousins and great aunts who are less than ideal. Think of the coming Thanksgiving holiday. If you are fortunate enough to be able to gather with your family - your extended family - and if you are honest, there will be people there who disagree and are disagreeable. Some disagreements may be so strong that you feel it best to avoid certain subjects. But no matter what your opinions are, and no matter how outrageous others' opinions are, you are family. Everyone belongs there. No one is ex-communicated. That picture is what the truly catholic church is like." (On-line, Tucker Foundation, Dartmouth College, "The Holy Catholic Church," Chaplain Richard Tucker, Nov. 11, 2004)

That is what the catholic, universal church is like. We are diverse, and we have a lot of things about which we agree, but also a lot of things about which we disagree. The bottom line is respect.

I'm blessed to be a part of the Greater Elkton Ministerial Association which meets monthly during the school year. It includes pastors from all over Elkton, and from all over the map, theologically. But we are one in Christ Jesus, and we enjoy being together. Rather than dwell on our differences, we try to learn from each other and support one another. I'll never forget the time that Pastor Alan Bosmeny from First Assembly of God asked me to tell him about Lent. He had no idea about the season of Lent, and what it means, and what we do during Lent. It's not a part of his tradition, and it was so nice of him to ask about it, and let me tell him about it.

And from Pastor Arthur Miller from the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Fair Hill I learned about Sabbath School, rather than Sunday School - since their sabbath day is Saturday.

Those are just a few of the things that I've learned from my colleagues, but what I want you to know is that the group is so rich and wonderful because we remember first and foremost what we have in common - and that is Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's why we say, "I believe in the holy catholic church." Because God in His wisdom, and through the Holy Spirit, has led people throughout the ages to come together in churches all over the world under the Lordship of Christ, and though we are many, we are one.

So I want to finish today with a story from the Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock. Craddock is a wonderful preacher and a wonderful teacher of preachers. This is his story, and these are his words:

He says: "My mother took us to church and Sunday School; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, 'I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge.' That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, 'There's one now, sic him, get him, get him,' and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And my father always said, 'The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge.' I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, 'It's too late.' They put in a metal tube, and X-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line (Craddock says), I would not tell you this story. He wrote: 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.'

I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?'

And he wrote, 'I was wrong.'"

(*Craddock Stories*, Fred Craddock, p. 14)

We believe in the holy catholic church - all of it, in all its diversity and glory. We believe in the holy catholic church, thank God for it, pray for it, and pledge ourselves to it. Thanks be to God for the gift of the church, here in this place, here in this town, and all around the world.

Amen